



Judi Fletcher and Lucidea Moore's story of

# Raj-Kaur Poran



Writing our mother's story was a wonderful opportunity for us to reflect upon her life. And what a life she had. Our mother was born in the small village of Mehta, in the Punjab in India. The year would be a guess because no one kept birth or death records in her village, probably sometime around 1910. Growing up in her village she didn't go to school, but was expected to work around their family home and learn to cook. When she was about thirteen and working in the field, she told us that a woman in the village was giving birth and our mum was called to help. As soon as the head showed our mum threw up. Some help! At around the same time she started her period and not knowing what was happening she threw a hysterical fit and our grand dad had to calm her down. It's sad how uninformed young women were then.

Well she was getting on in years, after all she was now 15 and a marriage was arranged with our dad. After the wedding he came to Canada to start a new life and left our mother there for 14 years. We can only assume our dad had no interest in bringing her to Canada since bachelorhood seemed to suit him.

In 1939, my paternal grandfather went back to India to bring my mother and two other brides to Canada. They had a harrowing journey from India to Canada. The war was raging so it was blackout every night. It was a very rough journey and my mother and her friends were very unwell and would only eat rice.

My grandfather died on route and had a sea burial.

She was alone and illiterate; travelling to a new country to spend her life with a man she met only once!!! Upon arriving in Hong Kong on her way to Vancouver, there was a serious communication breakdown which left my mother and her friends in Hong Kong taking refuge in a Sikh Temple for several months.

She finally arrived in Canada and moved into her house in North Vancouver around 1939. Everything was strange in her new country. She had a wood stove in her new house, and almost burned the house down when she lit the fire under the stove instead of in it.

When she witnessed her first snow fall she ran outside because she thought it was cotton falling from the sky. She slipped on the ice once and a bus driver stopped to help her. Because she knew little English she told him to "shut up", when she really meant, "thank you." For many years after that when she boarded his bus he jokingly would say "shut up Mrs. Poran". The first time she tried to buy eggs at the corner store, she couldn't spot them and the grocer tried to help. Finally she squatted down and made sounds like a chicken.

One day she was picking flowers in the yard and the neighbour yelled at her. She didn't know what he said, but she knew he was angry. She told our dad and the very next day he went to the district and bought the property. He told her if the neighbor said anything to tell him to, "get off our property".

Thankfully, everything worked out well, and they were wonderful neighbors that we grew up calling Nana and Uncle Bob.

Our mum wanted to go to school to learn to speak and write English, but our dad said it wasn't necessary because he was there to look after her, which really didn't last too long as our dad passed away when I was 15. As is the Indian custom women would come to our house and wail, and our mum and her friends would curse our dad for leaving her with two teenage daughters. It was all part of the culture so we didn't take offence.

Because of my mother's lack of education there were occasions that she totally misunderstood what was being said. For instance when she was watching the news on TV one morning my mother thought the queen had died. She told my husband who promptly called me at work and told me the queen died in

Mexico. I was in utter disbelief and yelled it out to my boss who was on the phone to another lawyer and passed the news on to him. Also being a monarchist I usually had a clue where the queen was and couldn't quite believe she was in Mexico. However my co-worker called a news station to ask about the passing of the queen. Well she got an earful. "It wasn't the queen, it was Steve McQueen and it isn't funny to make calls like that, blah, blah, blah." We issued an immediate retraction.

In the 70's my mum always keep hearing about marijuana on T.V. I am not sure how she figured out that marijuana was the mayor of the hippies, but it sure was fun telling her what it really was.

After our dad died, our mother who had never worked outside the house went to the lumber mill where our dad worked and asked the owner to let her take surplus wood which she loaded into our dad's truck. Then she would pay drivers to deliver the firewood to our dad's customers.

After several years the mill closed and our mum went to work as a kitchen helper. Her first kitchen adventure was in a pizza shop. One evening the owner left our mum in charge so he could go to the bar next door. She quickly called home and recruited us. We waited on tables while she made the pizzas. The customers lined up and told her what they wanted on the pizzas. There certainly wasn't going to be any writing and reading involved.

Rupe, the owner used to give our mum a pizza to take home every day. How much pizza can one family eat? So ever the enterprising woman she was she started to sell the pizzas to the local grocery store. On day Rupe had to go to the grocery store and you can only imagine his reaction when he saw his pizzas in the freezer. And so ended her career as a pizza maker.

She moved on but continued working in the restaurant industry well into her seventies.

Another place of employment was for a private club and our mum would serve coffee and goodies from the little takeout place. One day one of the members wanted to introduce her to his wife. To which our mum replied, "This is your wife? Who is the other lady you bring here?" The wife ran off screaming and our mum was demoted to the kitchen.

Getting her driver's license was such a frightening event that we have erased it from our memories. Because of her illiteracy she drove by association. Turn left at the red mailbox; go until you see a gas station on her right, etc. On one occasion she was driving down a one way street the wrong way. When she was stopped by the police and he said "you are going down a one way street". Our mum said, "I know, I am only going one way".

Our mum was an extremely kind hearted and generous person. We didn't have a lot but I recall her letting a man who had very little, and was obviously hungry work her garden in return for food, and meals that she cooked for him. At one time two of our girlfriends, a gay male friend, our mum, and my sister and I were all in the little two bedroom house together. The girls slept together, the gay friend was in the attic and our mum slept on a cot in the kitchen. She used to say she had five daughters.

In her busy life our mum also found time to be an activist. One day my sister called me and yelled, "Turn on the TV. Jeez, mum's on it marching around". Indeed there she was with a black arm band and limping around some woman's house and yelling taunts in Punjabi, calling her a "kuti" and a "lungi" which do not need to be translated. There had been a killing in the woman's family and our mum and her friends were enraged and wanted her to show her that life was not like that in Canada.

Our mum also became a property owner and landlord and I believe she was a true renaissance woman.

Both of us married outside of our cultural group and our mum was amazingly supportive. We will always admire her and be forever grateful to her for giving up her place in the Indian community to support her daughters.

One of her desires was to see her grandchildren grown and happily settled. The greatest joy our mother had was from her grandchildren whom she loved, and adored unconditionally. We regret that she died before she could have enjoyed their weddings and her great grandchildren.

Always loved, always missed, our mum, Raj-Kaur Poran Writing our mother's story was a wonderful opportunity for us to reflect upon her life. And what a life she had.